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Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Tonto National Forest

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scanned &
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All Interested Publics

Dear Interested Party,

The Tonto National Forest is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on a proposal to improve ecological conditions and to authorize continued livestock grazing on six grazing allotments along the Salt River within the Globe and Tonto Basin Ranger Districts, Gila County Arizona. The project will involve using a variety of tools such as fire and grazing management to improve identified ecological conditions and will be consistent with the Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan (1985, as amended).

Decisions resulting from this analysis will address actions needed to implement an adaptive management strategy to maintain or move toward desired resource conditions on the Haystack Butte, Dagger, Sedow, Poison Springs/Sierra Ancha, Chrysotile and Hicks Pike Peak allotments.

Please review the proposed action. If you have information that would contribute to a decision regarding this action, please send your comments in writing by July 5, 2011. The information you provide will help develop alternatives that will address issues identified for this action. Alternatives, along with analyses and effects, will be documented in the EIS.

Purpose and Need for Action

Six authorizations for livestock grazing have or will soon expire and ecological conditions in some areas on these allotments have not moved towards desired future conditions as outlined in the Tonto National Forest Plan. For example, diversity of current vegetation (including where it is located and how it functions) does not meet desired future conditions in all locations within the project area. Past management practices, such as suppression of wildland fires are limited and have not always proven effective. In addition, knowledge and strategies for ecosystem management have changed over time, providing an opportunity to improve vegetative conditions using current science, methods, and strategies. As a result, there is a need to develop new management strategies for ecosystems within the six allotments along the Salt River.

The purpose of this effort is to improve ecological conditions within the project area using tools such as fire and grazing management in order to meet desired future conditions as specified in the Forest Plan while balancing multiples uses. In addition, per Forest Service Handbook 2209.13, Chapter 90, section 92.22, the purpose of this action is to authorize livestock grazing in a manner consistent with Forest Plan direction to move ecosystems towards their desired conditions.

Proposed Action

The Tonto National Forest proposes to use a set of tools that lessen or eliminate disparities between existing conditions and desired conditions in the project area. Examples of tools that land managers may use to accomplish this include, but are not limited to, livestock grazing, prescribed fire, managed wildland fire, herbicide application, mechanical vegetative removal, and seeding. The proposed action includes an adaptive management strategy that allows land managers to be flexible enough to make timely decisions relative to a host of ever changing environmental conditions (CFR 220.3). This proposed action focuses on



entire ecosystem potential rather than a subordinate role of a single resource use or activity within analysis area ecosystems.

Since one tool under consideration for executing the proposed action is grazing, Globe and Tonto Basin Ranger Districts, in collaboration with grazing permittees, propose to reauthorize livestock grazing on six allotments; Chrysotile, Haystack Butte, Dagger, Sedow, Hicks Pikes Peak and Poison Springs/Sierra Ancha. Livestock grazing, as an ecosystem tool, would provide year-long application utilizing various age classes of cattle on each allotment. Grazing would continue to comply with the Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan (1985 as amended), which provides direction for grazing using various management levels in five management areas on these two districts. Grazing practices would comply with national and regional policy and direction (FSM 2200, FSH 2209.13) and would incorporate adaptive management strategies (FSH 2209.13 Chapter 90) to optimize forage production where appropriate and benefit a variety of natural resources and multiple use objectives in ecosystems ranging from grassland to forest.

Conditions are highly variable in the analysis area ecosystems due to historically dynamic climatic regimes in the desert southwest and globally changing climate conditions. Production of palatable forage and browse for livestock and wildlife varies greatly both seasonally and annually. Through adaptive management strategies, this proposed action strives to respond to change by utilizing a variety of tactics, which may include but are not limited to, flexible stocking rates, vegetation manipulation, and water development. Actual numbers, season of use, and class of domestic grazing animal would be determined annually within upper allowed stocking limits for the Tonto National Forest of 800 animals per grazing permittee (FSH 2209.13). Data for determining stocking would be gathered throughout each grazing season using a variety of monitoring techniques as described in agency manuals and handbooks as well as through scientific literature produced through other agencies, research stations, and universities.

Rangeland allotment infrastructure includes, but is not limited to, forms of improvements such as fences, water wells, spring developments, storage tanks, pipelines, and watering troughs. These improvements range in condition from excellent to poor. Those in poor condition are considered a priority for improvement through this proposed action. Additionally, each allotment will propose a variety of new range improvements to be constructed for facilitation of livestock distribution to accomplish ecosystem objectives.

Additional management tools, including but not limited to, wildfire and prescribed fire and noxious weed treatments are proposed for use to benefit forage and browse production and other resource objectives. Globe and Tonto Basin Ranger Districts also propose use of fuels management techniques on these allotments as authorized through Tonto National Forest Land Management Plan (1985, as amended), to allow wildfire to resume its natural ecological role in fire dependent ecosystems. The proposed action includes specific objectives and treatment alternatives for the following Management Areas found within analysis area:

6J General Management Area – Tonto Basin Ranger District

Wildland fire would be managed to protect, maintain, and enhance federal lands in a cost effective manner. A combination of wildfire and prescribed fire may be used to provide a mosaic of age classes and a mix of successional stages within fire-dependent ecosystems. Wildfires, or portions of those fires, would be suppressed when they adversely affect forest resources, endanger public safety, or have potential to damage property and natural/cultural resources. Sonoran Desert and riparian vegetation types would be protected from fire except where burn plans identify resource and ecological need.

2F General Management Area – Globe Ranger District

Wildland fire would be managed to protect, maintain, and enhance federal lands in a cost effective manner. A combination of wildfire and prescribed fire may be used to provide a mosaic of age classes and a mix of successional stages within fire-dependent ecosystems. Wildfires, or portions of those fires, would be suppressed when they adversely affect forest resources, endanger public safety, or have potential to damage

property and natural/cultural resources. Sonoran Desert and riparian vegetation types would be protected from fire except where burn plans identify resource and ecological needs.

A variety of fuels management techniques may be used to reduce natural and activity fuels to condition class 1 (e.g., fire regime within historic range and vegetation composition, function, and structure are within normal range), including fuel wood harvesting, chipping, pile and burn, and broadcast burning.

2C Upper Salt River Management Area – Globe Ranger District

Wildland fire would be managed to protect, maintain, and enhance federal lands in a cost effective manner. Fire management objectives for this area include providing a mosaic of age classes within total type, which would provide a mix of successional stages, and allow wildfire to resume its natural ecological role within ecosystems. Wildfires, or portions of those fires, would be suppressed when they adversely affect forest resources, endanger public safety, or have potential to damage property and natural/cultural resources.

2B Salt River Canyon Wilderness – Globe Ranger District / 5A Sierra Ancha Wilderness – Pleasant Valley Ranger District

Wildland fire would be managed to protect, maintain, and enhance federal lands in a cost effective manner consistent with wilderness resource objectives. Wildfire may be used to play, as nearly as possible, its natural role in wilderness while also reducing unnatural fuel hazards as identified in Forest Service Manual and approved Wilderness Implementation Plan.

Preliminary Issues

Multiple uses considered within the Salt River Corridor are an issue with Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive species, recreation, and riparian resources.

Decision to be Made

The Forest Service would evaluate the proposed action and alternatives to the proposed action. After reviewing the proposed action, the alternatives, the environmental analysis, and considering public comment, the two District Rangers, Richard Reitz on the Globe District and Kelly Jardine on the Tonto Basin District, would reach a decision that is in accordance with the purpose and need of this project. The decision would include a description of activities that would be implemented.

Implementation of an Allotment Management Plan for each of the six allotments would immediately follow the decision and close of the appeal period (if applicable). Reauthorization of livestock grazing would be for a minimum of ten years.

Scoping Input Needed

Written comments on this scoping letter will be accepted during a 30-day comment period, ending on July 5, 2011. Please send all comments to:

Tonto National Forest
ATTN: Kathy Nelson, Project Leader
2324 E. McDowell Road
Phoenix, Arizona 85006

or by e-mail to: comments-southwestern-tonto@fs.fed.us

We would like to know of any specific concerns and/or alternatives that you feel need to be considered within the context of this proposed action. Please make your comments as concise as you can and address the proposed action specifically.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record of this analysis and will be included in the final project record. Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality.

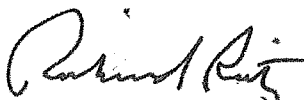
If you do not have comments at this time, but would like to be informed of this analysis as it progresses, please let us know. Those who do not respond to this request will be removed from future mailings regarding this project.

If you have any questions concerning this process, please contact Kathy Nelson at (602) 225-5328.

Sincerely,



Kelly Jardine
Tonto Basin District Ranger



Richard Reitz
Globe District Ranger